

Birnbaum speaks at White House summit

By Eddy Ball

NIEHS and NTP Director Linda Birnbaum, Ph.D., joined other environmental leaders March 20 for the [2nd Annual Women and the Environment Summit](http://www.epa.gov/womenandgirls/pdfs/2013-Women-and-the-Environment-Summit-Agenda.pdf) (<http://www.epa.gov/womenandgirls/pdfs/2013-Women-and-the-Environment-Summit-Agenda.pdf>) at the White House. The agenda featured talks by Birnbaum, senior scientific administrators from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), White House officials, and representatives of several non-profit advocacy groups, including NIEHS grantee Elizabeth Yeampierre, J.D., executive director of the United Puerto Rican Organization of Sunset Park and a member of the NIEHS Council.

More than 100 women leaders in the environmental field, or related fields such as public health, engaged in three panels and four breakout sessions. The summit featured opening remarks by Gina McCarthy, the top air pollution regulator at EPA and President Obama's nominee to succeed Lisa Jackson as administrator, and Allison Whipple Rockefeller, founding chair of the Rachel Carson Awards Council. The Summit included briefings from White House Officials and three panel discussions with diverse business and community leaders from across the country, followed by breakout sessions.

The event, which was one of many celebrating Women's History Month nationwide, underscored the continued need for women to take an active role in protecting natural resources.

Focusing on environmental public health

Through her participation on the first panel of the day and in a breakout session on Healthy and Sustainable Communities, Birnbaum focused on the public health concerns that drive NIEHS research. She noted NIEHS initiatives in the areas of breast cancer, where the Institute invested more than \$31 million in 2012 alone; noncommunicable diseases, most of which are linked to environmental factors; and children's health and development, which are disproportionately affected during windows of susceptibility by the exposure to chemicals inadequately regulated by the Toxic Substances Control Act.

Turning to the burning issue of health care costs, Birnbaum offered an example of the cobenefits to be achieved through interventions to reduce harmful environmental exposures. "In addition to just being the right thing to do — being good custodians of mother earth — preventing disease through improving the environment and reducing adverse exposures is one of the best ways to achieve health care cost reduction."

Even though she wasn't a part of the Environmental STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) and Careers breakout session, she spoke with pride about NIEHS efforts to support women's scientific careers.

"The institute has a very strong history of promoting women in STEM careers, from kindergarten students through postdoctoral fellows," she told the audience. "We are proud of the high-quality on-site day care facility, the flexible work schedules, telework options, and family friendly leave policies NIEHS offers employees. This means that more women want and are able to have a rewarding career in research, and the opportunities to make great discoveries."

Following a recap of breakout session findings, the event concluded with a presentation by Nancy Sutley, chair of the White House Council on Environmental Quality.



"Environmental health matters because millions of lives can be improved by simply better understanding how the environment effects out health," Birnbaum told attendees. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



A community organizer concerned with health of minority residents of Brooklyn, Yeampierre helped raise awareness of environmental justice issues with her participation on panel two. She is shown above during her presentation at NIEHS (see [story](#)) in October 2012. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)

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